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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the training of a high school assistance team designed to guide younger students. The program, which was directed at students in grades 7 and 8, lasted for 1 year and involved students in community service and challenge activities. The setting was a small rural school in Vermont, with nearly 400 students in grades 7-12. Teachers had become concerned that the needs of all students were not being addressed at the school, arising in part from a lack of connectedness. It was suggested that high school students could serve as role models to the younger students and external funding was secured to initiate a training program for these student mentors. Following a careful selection process, 20 high school students, 4 teachers, and a guidance counselor met with trainers in two full days of training sessions. Some of the activities, which were intended to help the younger students, included field trips with peer leaders, challenge games, and a service project designed to assist the elderly. Results indicate that peer leaders experienced success in the leadership roles given them. The 30 at-risk students also improved, with improved attention, attendance, and grades. (RJM)

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Peer Leadership in a Rural School Setting

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Peer Leadership in a Rural School Setting

Abstract

Teacher examination of adolescent issues and team planning with other professionals resulted in the development of an externally funded year-long training program. An identified population of grade 7-8 students participated in community service and unique challenge activities led by trained high school peer leaders. Beneficial effects on students and teachers are reported.

Peer Leadership in a Rural School Setting

Training of high school assistance teams to guide younger students has grown more prominent as societal problems increasingly visit the school. The need for a variety of ways to provide academic support has been demonstrated in decreased performance in test scores, and a number of peer leadership programs have incorporated peer and cross-age tutoring programs to assist at-risk students (Enright & Axelrod, 1995; Fantuzzo, 1992; Greenwood, Terry, Utley, Montagna, & Walker, 1993; Kehayan, 1987; Lynn, 1986; Purcell & Nagle, 1981; Simmons, Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Hodge,1995; Thomas, 1987). Affirming the importance of relationships and character-building is central to other programs (Chalmers, 1991; Cohen, 1995; Lynn, 1986). Improved social skills, teamwork, positive attitudes, and behavior are seen as connected to these productive school experiences. Increasingly, programs focusing on conflict resolution, sexual harassment, suicide, drop-out, and drug prevention are offered as peer leadership opportunities; some of these programs have met with mixed results (Benson & Benson, 1993; Lewis & Lewis, 1996; Lupton-Smith, Carruthers, Flythe; Goettee, & Modest, 1996; Martin, Martin, & Barrett, 1987; Rau, 1997; Srebnik & Elias, 1993; Thompson, 1996; Willis, 1993). Manuals and guidelines for organizing and implementing peer leadership programs, which have educational and social purposes, have been developed (Carr & Saunders, n.d., Foster & Tindall, 1992; Foster-Harrison, 1995; Levine & Kreitzer, 1996; Rekrut, 1994; Townsend, 1992). This article describes a peer leadership program for high school students in a rural setting designed to promote the social skills of early adolescent students, whose appearance, behavior, social skills, and/or home

background contributed to their being viewed as outsiders in the school setting.

School Background

A small rural school in Vermont of nearly 400 students, grades 7-12, faced problems common to many junior-senior high school facilities. These problems included the need for the development of social skills among early adolescents and the integration of older and younger students.

A Junior High House had been established on the first floor of the school for grades 7-8. Teachers in most subject fields were scheduled to discuss academic and social progress of the 120+ students in their care. The eight teachers who met daily believed that the school's responsibility to meet the needs of all students was not being addressed. The tone of daily meetings had grown negative. The same students were discussed regularly and were not improving. The guidance counselor spoke of the lack of connectedness a variety of students were experiencing. A substantial effort to support these students was needed. The team of teachers suggested that previous students could serve as role models for the younger students. Before high school students could serve as role models, however, they could benefit from training in social and leadership skills. Finding a way to involve the social services workers, who visited the school weekly and provided 1:1 counseling to individual students, was seen as potentially valuable. The staff of the social service agency could work with the guidance counselor and faculty to improve the school life of identified junior high students. Soliciting external funding to support creative efforts to assist these students became a priority.

Funding Sources

Originating as a hospital and private psychiatric facility, Forest Hospital runs a twelve month day school program for troubled students, ages 12-20, and a sheltered workshop. Inpatient programs offer assistance with behavioral/emotional disturbances, eating disorders, alcohol and drug dependency programs for adolescents and adults. Vocational counseling and rehabilitation services are also provided. Because of its broad mission, Forest Hospital and Foundation regularly support therapeutic educational and community service programs through grants. One of the particular interests of the Foundation has been the establishment of peer leadership programs in school settings.

Local funding was also received. SerVermont, a small state-wide funding initiative designed to foster community service programs in schools, linked well with the intent of this effort. Selection of two groups of participants, identified junior high students and high school peer leaders, was the first task.

Selection Process

Led by the school guidance counselor, the pupil personnel team (junior high teachers, nurse, special education director, and assistant principal) reviewed records of and experiences with all junior high students, giving special attention to the problem types of concern to Forest Foundation. These problems included the broad areas of alcohol, birth control, boyfriend/girlfriend, career plans, college, death, decision-making, depression, drugs, family, friends, loneliness, teen marriage, phobias, health, pregnancy, rape, religion, running away, school, self image, sex, stress, suicide, truancy, violence in relationships, and work. The predominant problem areas were in the areas of decision-making,

depression, family, friends, school, and self image. Thirty students were selected to participate in the program.

A second selection process involved the peer leaders. During an extended homeroom period, junior high students were asked to choose high school students they admired; at the same time they indicated areas of concern or questions they wanted to discuss with someone. Through this process, twenty student candidates for peer leadership were interviewed. They were asked to suggest potential responsibilities for peer leaders whose goal was to be of service to other students in the junior high, discuss contributions they could make to the group, and indicate their interest in participation.

Training Program

In order to make connections with those early adolescent students identified as having difficulty in social relationships because of the above stated problems, the high school students needed training. As part of the Resource Agent Program in the State of Vermont, a network of school professionals helping schools, Fred Remington and Jane Jenson, West Rutland High School teachers, had imlemented The Peer Group, a program whose purpose was to build peer leadership programs in school settings.

In two full day training sessions, the 20 high school students, four teachers, and guidance counselor met with the trainers. Local consultants led discussions and activities on topics such as friendship, families, depression, grieving, substance abuse, suicide, rape, and teen pregnancy. The leaders interspersed these topics with exercises on team building, relationships and communication. The final session engaged the group in planning their new roles in the school and in developing a sense of mission.

In the next section, activities that peer leaders undertook to assist junior high students in building successful relationships with others are described. A range of activities were generated during the planning sessions between peer leaders and adults, including field trips, challenge games, and a community service project. The purpose, description, benefits, and any problems encountered will be discussed for each activity. Each program had identified adult leaders, teachers and parents, who worked with the peer leaders.

Activities

Field Trips

Field trips were designed to integrate identified junior high students with other students so that they would begin building successful social relationships. In a comfortable social setting, it was anticipated that peer leaders would develop leadership skills and serve as role models. Trips ranged from informal afternoon or evening plans, including pizza, bowling, skiing to more structured programs with other purposes in addition to social. Squam Lake Survival Camping Weekend involved students in gaining outdoor winter skills and teamwork. A visit to Dartmouth College invited students to consider college as an option as well as attend an athletic event. An exchange day had a group of students share the benefits of going to school in a rural setting, then experience life at an urban school. Beyond well-planned individual social events, an on-going training program was initiated.

Challenge Games

Preparation for Challenge Games required intensive training for peer leaders. For seven weeks, boy-girl pairs met with a social services staff member who taught them Project Adventure activities drawn from

Sergeant Camp in New Hampshire (Rohnke, 1977, 1984). The games were intended to promote self confidence, cooperation within heterogeneous groups, and problem-solving skills in participants. Peer leaders mastered a difficult task as they learned directions for activities and ways to teach others to work together. At this point, peer leaders were ready to demonstrate their leadership skills.

Peer leaders then met with junior high gym classes, which were scheduled the last two periods of the day, and practiced with small groups of eight students under the guidance of two gym teachers. The small groups of students were selected with the purpose of integrating identified students with other early adolescents and also were balanced for athletic abilities. In May, a half day was devoted to Challenge Games and the teams engaged in cooperative competition. Challenge Games enabled early adolescents to improve relationships within the school with their peers and older students. Connecting early adolescents with the larger community was met through the third activity.

Community Service

A SerVermont grant enabled the identified junior high students to work with selected peer leaders in planning a community service project for a residence for the elderly. In Turning Points (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), the fact that schools need to be involved with service to local communities is underscored and experiences adolescents can have in serving a home for senior citizens are recommended. In order to offer early adolescents the opportunity to perform community service, the guidance counselor and nursing home staff set up a relationship to benefit students and the residents in the nursing home/hospital facility. Early adolescents purchased parakeets

and fish for the elderly residents and signed up for regular meetings with the residents and to care for the pets. Peer leaders helped set up the schedule. Peer leaders also guided early adolescents in making a checkerboard and checkers for residents overseen by the industrial arts teacher. Some initial fears existed about talking with older people, and time to talk these through was essential. Young students grew in these roles and some became much appreciated visitors.

Conclusion

Peer leaders experienced success in the leadership roles afforded them. They saw, as student helpers and role models, they could contribute a great deal. In the following summer, several students represented the school at Green Mountain Training Institute, a week long program to combat teenage substance abuse. The school was selected as a site for a community based substance abuse grant and peer leaders continue their role through this funding.

For the 30 identified students, changes occurred as well. Academically, teachers reported increased attention and attendance for these students. An examination of discipline records indicated a reduction in frequency of problem referrals that extended beyond the identified students. The school experienced a 30% decline in the number of disciplinary referrals at the seventh and eighth grade level from fall to spring; in previous years, disciplinary actions substantially increased toward the end of the school year. In addition, the types of discipline cases reported were not as severe; for example, the number of fights decreased. This decline may have been related to the activity-based, intensive program that built positive relationships for early adolescents with peer leaders and the elderly.

Previously, social services personnel had spent most of their time in individual conferences. Involving them in the Challenge Games and training of older students, expanded their influence and impact. Finding ways this kind of agency can work with schools in program development can offer schools useful and creative options for improving the relationships among students and the school climate.

Teachers became more involved with the concerns sometimes reserved for the guidance office because of the regular planning of activities in team meetings. It is common in academic circles to talk of all teachers being teachers of writing or reading; this program enabled more teachers to think about their responsibilities in guidance, a role that continues to grow in importance in today's schools.

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